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What is This?
Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

Janice Bially Mattern

Soft power—the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion—has become an important part of scholarly thinking and policy practice with respect to world politics. And yet attraction, the core component of soft power, has been largely neglected in scholarly research. Research has been undertaken, policy suggestions offered, and ethical conclusions about soft power drawn all on the basis of implicit and often unacknowledged assumptions about attraction. As I argue here, this is problematic because neither of the most prominent assumptions—attraction as natural and attraction as constructed through persuasive argument—are feasible or logical in the context of world politics. In fact, as I argue, in the context of world politics it makes far more sense to model attraction as a relationship that is constructed through representational force—a nonphysical but nevertheless coercive form of power that is exercised through language. Insofar as attraction is sociolinguistically constructed through representational force, soft power should be not be understood in juxtaposition to hard power but as a continuation of it by different means. This analytic insight in turn demands some practical and normative reformulations about soft power.

Since 9/11, the Bush administration has consciously refashioned the American role in world politics from that of benign hegemon to that of neo-imperialist. It has abandoned the ‘soft power’ politics of constructive engagement and multilateralism in favour of the ‘hard power’ politics of the war on terrorism. But as the increasingly unpopular Iraq war runs headlong into rising expenses and American causalities it is seen as

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inevitable – and for many, preferable – that the US war on terrorism will eventually have to rely much more on soft power political strategies.\(^1\) Understood as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, soft power can, advocates claim, make allies out of Islamists, repair US relationships with its disenchanted allies, and even put ‘third world’ states on the right path toward development.\(^2\) In this way, soft power promises to be a ‘means to success in world politics’.\(^3\) Indeed, soft power is touted not just as a tool for the US to use in its effort to right its relations, but as a tool that can be used by any country or any actor in world politics to achieve a greater degree of influence over the dynamics of world politics.\(^4\)

At the same time, however, soft power remains rather poorly understood. For instance, soft power works by attraction: by ‘convincing others to follow’ based on ‘the appeal of one’s ideas’.\(^5\) But what exactly is it that makes an idea attractive or appealing in the first place? Attraction is a rather subjective experience, which raises the question of what makes something or someone alluring to some and not to others. How, the question is, does attraction happen? Questions that probe the character of attraction in the context of soft power arise not just from the academic impulse for theoretic clarity, but also in relation to the practical uses of soft power. For actors who aim to deploy soft power, success will ultimately depend on knowing how exactly to make their ideas and themselves attractive to a target population.

It is thus unfortunate for state and nonstate strategists alike that International Relations (IR) scholars have not engaged in explicit inquiries into attraction as it applies to world politics. Indeed, as I argue below, to date the literature has been satisfied with accounts of attraction that rest either on unexamined assumptions about its naturalness or on a particular type of circular logic characteristic of Habermasian approaches to persuasion. In response, this essay seeks to offer an alternative framework for thinking about attraction in world politics – one upon which a more rigorous, logical, and thus practically useful model of soft power might be built. Ultimately such a model should be able to sustain empirical inquiry and so shape useful policy practice, but for now the goal is simply to offer a basic sketch of attraction.

My starting point, which tracks at first with the (ultimately flawed) Habermasian-inspired approach, is that attraction is constructed through communicative exchange. Thus, I abide the basic constructivist insights that ‘reality’ – the broadly accepted facts of the world and the socially expected behaviours that are implied by those facts – is not pre-given and objective, but socially constructed through an ongoing collective process. Actors interpret the world in unique ways, and as they communicate with one another about their interpretations their communicative process enables them to whittle down the diversity of multiple interpretations into one or a few socially legitimated interpretations. Those then acquire the status of the ‘real truth’. Since communicative processes occur most fundamentally through the medium of language, it follows that ‘reality’ is a sociolinguistic construct. The same is true for the ‘reality’ of attractiveness. It is a sociolinguistically constructed ‘truth’ about the appeal of some idea; an interpretation that won out over many other possible interpretations through a communicative process.

And yet, as Jean François Lyotard has famously noted in response to Habermas’s version of constructivism and communicative exchange, if one’s goal is to get some idea or thing anointed as attractive ‘in fact’ or in ‘reality’ – which is precisely why soft power is appealing to the policy community – persuasion is not likely to be the most effective strategy. This is because as a method of communicative exchange, persuasion functions through argument, and argument, in turn, rests upon evidence-based reasoning. As Lyotard argues, though,

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6. Language is any sign system, whether those signs are verbal or written words, gestures, art, or other forms of expression. But since it is most accessible, I focus on verbal and written language.
in the context of ‘reality’ construction interlocutors often don’t even share understandings of what counts as evidence, and thus, they cannot reason about it. On the contrary, in such a situation, actors often have incentives, which are rooted in the ontological (in)security of their sociolinguistically-constructed subjectivity, to fix the terms of the ‘reality’ in question in a manner that is congenial to the perpetuation of their Self – regardless of others’ views of the ‘evidence’. Thus, rather than trying to persuade one another of the ‘true’ meaning of ‘reality’ they fight over it (verbally) among themselves. They sociolinguistically construct ‘reality’ not through evidence-based argument but through representational force.

Representational force is a form of power that operates through the structure of a speaker’s narrative representation of ‘reality’. Specifically, a narrative expresses representational force when it is organised in such a way that it threatens the audience with unthinkable harm unless it submits, in word and in deed, to the terms of the speaker’s viewpoint. The unthinkable harm threatened, however, is not physical, for that would imply physical force rather than representational force. Instead the harm promised is to the victim’s own ontological security – it is a threat that exploits the fragility of the sociolinguistic ‘realities’ that constitute the victim’s Self. When an author effectively builds such a threat into her narrative of ‘reality’, she can trap the victim with a ‘nonchoice’ between compliance with the view she articulates or tacit participation in the destabilisation, and even ‘death’, of the victim’s own subjectivity. Because it leaves the victim no viable ‘out’, representational force is a very effective tool for actors whose purpose is to ensure the ‘reality’ status of some specific viewpoint. Actors are likely to take advantage of it in world politics, where radical disagreement about the meaning of evidence is frequent and where the stakes of ‘reality’ construction can be quite high.

Insofar as verbal fighting via representational force does appear empirically to be a regular part of the construction of attraction in world politics, soft power is rather ironically rooted in hard power. What makes hard power ‘hard’ is its ability to threaten victims into

7. And sometimes physically, although I do not address this here since then the attempt to wield soft power slides into the use of hard power, as traditionally defined.

8. In this way, a speaker uses representational force to secure her Self but it is the (in)security of her victim’s Self that enables the speaker to formulate a representationally forceful threat.
compliance; that is, to coerce." Thus, where attraction rests upon coercion the logic of a distinction between soft and hard forms of power becomes unsustainable. Certainly the form of coercion (and ‘hard’ power) to which attraction (and ‘soft’ power) is indebted is sociolinguistic rather than physical, but it is coercive nevertheless. In this way, soft power is not so soft after all. This revelation inheres a variety of practical and normative implications for those actors who wish to effectively accumulate and wield ‘soft’ power.

Soft Power in World Politics

Few would take issue with the assertion that power is the currency of world politics. But what power is, exactly, remains in dispute. Military prowess and economic accumulation – both commonly recognised as hard power – are the uncontested baseline for thinking about power among IR scholars, but dissatisfaction with this simplistic conceptualisation has spurred myriad inquiries into other facets and forms of power. Among the revelations have been that power is a relationship rather than a ‘hard thing’; a process rather than a ‘hard condition’; and an idea or belief rather than a ‘hard fact’ of truth. In other words, conventional conceptions notwithstanding, it seems there is not much about power that is hard or fungible after all. And yet, when it comes to the practice of world politics (as opposed to scholarly reflection upon it) the received wisdom that guns and money are ‘hard’ instruments still largely holds; they are thought to speak for themselves as coercive resources and thus to work most effectively. Scholarly insight thus seems to have done little to change traditional beliefs about the nature of hard power and its practical supremacy.

But since Joseph Nye introduced the notion of soft power to the policy community (in 1990 in Bound to Lead) the presumption that hard power is the only effective means for getting what one wants in world politics has been eroding. His simple proposition is that beyond hard power there are instruments of power rooted in an actor’s ideological and cultural appeal to others. This is soft power and it promises ‘a way to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion’.10 Thus whereas hard power rests on ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ – inducements and threats – soft power convinces others that they should follow because of the allure of an other’s way of life.

Millennium

Of course Nye is hardly the first to recognise that power can be expressed without making threats or promising inducements. Thinkers no less significant than Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci and others have also articulated versions of ‘soft’ power.11 Steven Lukes, for instance, argues that power need not be blunt or behavioural; it can operate socially in ways that subconsciously affect the formation of preferences.12 Even within IR proper, scholars have been quite comfortable with ‘softer’ variations of power, especially the idea that it can be exercised through influence and legitimacy.13 Nonetheless, in contemporary mainstream scholarship and foreign policy circles it is Nye’s account that has captured imaginations. Perhaps this is because Nye does more than just call attention to soft power; he also treats it as a platform for action, arguing that actors have, can, and should continue to find ways to effectively develop and use this power resource. In this way Nye conceives of soft power in much the same way as many do hard power: as a tangible tool that can be amassed and deployed through concerted effort.

So how, according to Nye, does one ‘amass’ soft power? As Nye argues, the sources of soft power lie in the attractiveness of political and cultural values, ideals, and visions – specifically, those that are universal (as opposed to parochial) in orientation.14 Disappointingly, Nye says nothing about why universal values are the ‘right’ ones or how one acquires such values. As I suggest below, this is symptomatic of the problems with Nye’s account of attraction. But he does say quite a bit about how to parlay the ‘right’ values into soft power. He notes for instance that if one wants to develop soft power, consistency is key; congruity between an actor’s stated values and actual action enhances an actor’s appeal. Soft power also depends on others’ knowledge of one’s alluring qualities. Thus, according to Nye, regardless of how

Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

‘good’ one’s values and how consistent one’s record at pursuing them, unless others know about it, no power can be derived. In this way, the most fundamental way to ‘harvest’ soft power is to spread social knowledge about one’s values. Soft power, it seems, is rooted in communication.

Given that communication is so crucial, Nye draws a connection between the information age and the emergence of soft power as a practical tool in world politics. Of course Nye realises that soft power is nothing new; actors in world politics long have been engaged in activities that wield it, intentionally or not. But it is only since information technology has made it so cheap and easy to communicate with others around the world that using soft power has become feasible as part of a conscious, sustained grand strategy for all kinds of actors. This insight has become the basis for the practical suggestion that governments and other actors ought to practice public diplomacy; they ought to attempt to cultivate soft power through information and communication technologies. Government agencies, academics, and private think tanks have responded with vigor, devoting considerable energy and resources to developing such programs. Indeed, widespread investment in public diplomacy suggests that soft power has challenged the default dominance of hard power in world politics.

For many this is a welcome development. To policy practitioners, for instance, the appeal of soft power is that it is relatively cheap and it does not involve sending young citizens off to war. Soft power may also appeal to individuals and collective nonstate actors since, in
contrast to hard power, which the government controls through military and economic policies, soft power is available to any actor that can render itself attractive to another.\textsuperscript{20} Third, reliance on soft power is likely to appeal to ethically concerned people. After all, hard power works via coercive force; it compels the submission of its victims through threats of unbearable harm.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, where hard power dominates, so do moral dilemmas. Insofar as soft power rests on attraction it seems to promise an ethically superior method of political interaction.\textsuperscript{22}

A final constituency that may be satisfied by the concerted incorporation of soft power into the practice of world politics are IR scholars. After all, Nye’s account of soft power subtly integrates into the policy domain some of the long-standing scholarly insights about the workings of power, which have, until this point, been largely ignored as irrelevant to the bottom line of how to use power.\textsuperscript{23} Consider, for instance, the insight that power is a social relationship rather than some ‘thing’. While this is true of hard power as well as of soft power, in the case of the latter it is much harder to ignore in practice. Unlike guns, for instance, which are presumed to endow

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\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 90, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Nye apparently has a religious conviction about this point. See Michelle Bates Deakin, ‘Wielding Our Power’, \textit{UU World} 28, no. 6 (2005).
\item \textsuperscript{23} There is an important point of objection to how I have rendered this point that I wish to acknowledge. This is the postmodern proposition that theory is everything – that theory always creates practice even if practitioners do not realise it. [For the development of this point in philosophy, see Jean François Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979); in IR see Richard Ashley, ‘Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematic’, \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies} 17, no. 2 (1988).] I agree. However, it is clear that the theories that have underwritten the dominant practices of IR (e.g., realist theories of power politics) are so deeply engrained that for practitioners who abide them they are taken as truths not theories. This is also true for many IR scholars, who do not realize their own role in the perpetuation of status quo practices. What follows from this is that world politics, if it continues to follow the status quo, does not necessarily benefit in practical terms from further scholarly input. Scholars, on this view, thus have the job of reflecting upon practice rather than constituting it. This (mistaken) viewpoint would seem to have to change with soft power. Insofar as soft power is something that practitioners wish to pursue, even those scholars who view their role as predominantly reflective rather than constitutive can realise their constitutive or practical contribution. They can inform practitioners about how attraction works so they can more effectively ‘cultivate and harvest’ soft power.
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Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

someone with the power to coerce regardless of who they are and over whom they wish to wield their power, soft power only works on those who are attracted to the aspiring power holder. As such, were soft power to become part of strategic doctrine, practitioners could not use it without thinking about how it works. In order to use soft power practitioners need to know how to make their ‘position attractive in the eyes of others’.24 This is something about which IR scholars should have something to say.

The Character of Attraction

So far, however, the notion of attraction has been under-studied in IR. On one level, this relative inattention is not surprising since hard power/coercion has been assumed to be such a more urgent and effective practice in world politics. But soft power has been a matter of discussion for at least ten years and still there has been no sustained treatment of attraction. The result, I argue, is a confused implicit understanding that has given rise to contradictory practical implications.

Consider Nye’s treatment of attraction. As the premiere contemporary analyst and advocate of soft power it would seem crucial that Nye have a sufficiently considered and articulated view of this phenomenon. But Nye is quiet on the character of attraction. In fact, in order to figure out what Nye thinks one must read between the lines – and even his implied account yields disappointing inconsistencies. For instance, on the one hand Nye (implicitly) theorises attraction as a natural objective experience when he describes the allegedly universally attractive values of cosmopolitanism, democracy, and peace.25 On the other hand, Nye implies that attraction is a social construct; he emphasises the utility of public diplomacy for ‘converting’ foreigners so that they become attracted to one’s own values.26 In short, Nye assigns two ontological statuses to attraction – one as an essential condition and one as a result of social interaction.

This dual ontology is meta-theoretically problematic, which makes for bad theory; but even worse, it sows confusion about the kinds of practical expectations one can stake on soft power. Practically speaking, the logic of natural attraction counsels a much more status-quo world than that of constructed attraction, for in the former there is no need (or ability) to cultivate attraction, while in the latter the possibilities for convincing others of the allure of one’s values and culture are

25. Nye, Soft Power, XI.
26. Ibid., 111.
Millennium

potentially vast. So for a scholar trying to discern how much he can make of soft power and how much it can effect the shape of world politics, or for the practitioner trying to optimise soft power, the lack of clarity is troubling.

Certainly there exists other IR scholarship that invokes phenomena similar to attraction which could possibly offer the basis for knitting together a more theoretically and functionally consistent account of soft power. But that work too falls short. Consider for instance the now broad IR scholarship on the formation and maintenance of inter-state or inter-group collective identity. Although this literature is diverse – inspired variably by primordialist, social identity, and ‘mainstream’27 constructivist theories – each approach nevertheless invokes something akin to attraction to do important work in its arguments.28 Each posits (though in different ways) that similarity is alluring to actors; that is, that attraction draws like actors together into the international group.29 Yet, like Nye, none of these approaches pays much attention to the logic of attraction upon which their theories depend. Each (even, ironically, the constructivists) offers a worryingly underdeveloped natural or essentialist version of that phenomenon.

To begin with, consider the manner in which the various theories of identity-formation offer essentialist models of attraction. While the essentialism of the primordial view is obvious, in the case of social identity theory, the presumed naturalness of attraction rests (without explanation) with the assumption that actors are always positively disposed toward like-characterised actors and that they are necessarily (naturally) repelled from unlike actors (outgroups).30 In the case of constructivism, the curious and inconsistent alignment with a natural view of attraction surfaces in the claim that identity is formed through learning among actors. As Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett

27. I refer at this point in my argument to the narrowly defined constructivist scholarship often associated with Alexander Wendt, Michael Barnett, and Martha Finnemore, to name a few. Conceptually this form of constructivism is ‘thin’ in the sense that its view of social construction does not go ‘all the way down’.


29. In primordialism it is a natural similarity, in social identity theory it is in-group category similarity, and in constructivism it is the produced shared values, norms, and ideals.

30. Mercer, ‘Anarchy and Identity,’
formulate it, identities emerge when members learn to share them, but learning, in turn, supposes a teacher. In this way identity-formation actually depends on the teacher – someone, as Adler and Barnett argue, who is tacitly appointed to that status because other actors are simply magnetically drawn, or attracted, to him.31 In other words, international groups and the identities that underwrite them may be socially constructed but the attraction necessary for that construction is magnetic; it is natural and pre-given.

Each of these ‘natural’ accounts of attraction are improvements over Nye’s implied account of attraction simply because they are consistent in their ontological assumptions.32 But each still has problems. Foremost is the conceptual problem of where and how something natural (essential, biological, permanent, irrevocable) sits or can exist within a collective social body. Crucial here is that international actors tend to be groups that are themselves made of groups – whether security communities and alliances made of states, civilisations made of ethnic populations, or terrorist networks made of cells and nodes. This is important because it makes it difficult to envision where the ‘essentiality’ or locus of attraction exists in such an actor. There is no core, no corporate center, no body or brain. Certainly there is a metaphorical body in the membership, a metaphorical brain in the leadership, and a metaphorical corporate center in the bureaucracy. Certainly a collective actor acts as if it were unitary. But it makes little sense to posit that natural essentiality can derive from such metaphorical imagery and as if ontology. As a result the natural attraction model does not offer a very solid foundation upon which to predicate strategies designed to cultivate soft power. Anyway, if attraction were natural, one would not need to cultivate soft power in the first place. It would simply be there.

Insofar as the natural model of attraction in world politics is unsatisfying, a more constructivist-oriented model can be uncovered from the scholarship on persuasion. Drawing on the communicative theory of Jürgen Habermas, work in this vein seeks to model how actors use persuasive ‘talk’ to facilitate agreement, cooperation, and better relations across nearly every domain of world politics – from security to economics to ethics to foreign policy.33 What is most relevant about this work is that because of its Habermasian inspiration, it treats persuasion as a practice that can be enacted only through

32. Though constructivism does unfortunately posit two different ontologies for attraction and identity formation.
argument, a specific type of communicative form in which interlocutors are motivated to achieve a consensus about the truth exchange and reason about evidence. On Habermas’s view, then, argument is a way of ‘wooing’ willing interlocutors to agreement by illuminating the truth. Persuasion, that is, is a means of constructing attraction.34

The model of attraction embedded in this scholarship focuses on how the process of arguing leads actors with otherwise divergent perspectives on a given matter to feel drawn into a consensus on a viewpoint that all embrace. There have been a variety of formulations of how this process occurs – from Nye’s own emphasis on the persuasive effects of advertising, public diplomacy, and ‘narrowcasting’ (engaging in directed focus-group dialogues), through which speakers seek to educate their audience,35 to an emphasis, rather broadly embraced by various scholars, on framing. Framing is a practice in which speakers appeal to their audiences by taking a new or unfamiliar issue and making it familiar and salient by embedding it in social frames.36 And yet none of these alleged procedures for constructing attraction are true to the Habermasian spirit of persuasion; argument, strictly speaking, can only be said to occur where there is a reasoned exchange of evidence-based perspectives among willing, rational agents whose goal is truth. Public diplomacy, advertising, and narrowcasting do not qualify because they are communicative practices that are undiscerning about whether the audience is willing to participate and about whether they

35. Others have linked these practices to constructivist logic, thus emphasising the socially constructed version of Nye’s approach to attraction. See Arquilla and Ronfeldt, Emergence of Noopolitik; and Smyth, ‘Mapping US Public Diplomacy’.
are advancing the truth. Framing fails as well because it ‘couches’ the evidence rather than letting it speak for itself. For Habermas such tactics imply manipulation not persuasion. Such communicative practices cultivate not attraction to truth but bias toward ideology.

So how would one model the construction of attraction in a way consistent with Habermas’s framework of persuasion? Although some IR scholars have tried, so far it has proven a circular and unsatisfying endeavor. The reason has to do with Habermas’s theoretical edifice. In order to theorize away the need for interlocutors to resort to advertising, narrow-casting, or other such ‘truth-obscuring’ communicative strategies, Habermas posits that any given communicative exchange only qualifies as an argument if it occurs in a strictly defined environment in which, among other criteria, the participants share a common lifeworld. Understood as a basic stock of unquestioned shared knowledge that orients actors similarly in the world, a common lifeworld can be more familiarly understood as a culture. What is important about a common lifeworld or culture is that actors – even collective ones – become embedded in it. It constitutes them such that they share values and ideas with one another. This is significant, as Thomas Risse argues, because when actors from a common lifeworld engage in dialogue they will recognise one another as legitimate; it enables the audience to listen to a speaker without distraction, distrust, or disrespect; it makes it possible for the speaker to trust in the process enough to present evidence without prejudice. In this way, legitimacy among the interlocutors is what makes argument possible and what makes persuasion a resource for attraction rather than compulsion. Legitimacy, that is, is the core of the process by which attraction is socially constructed.

But this logic turns out to be circular. Legitimacy is taken as a necessary condition for true argument (and thus persuasion) where legitimacy is a function of a common lifeworld or culture among interlocutors. What this means is that legitimacy derives from shared sensibility among actors about the kinds of ideas and values that are appealing. In other words, legitimacy comes from common attraction in the

37. Crawford, Argument and Change; and Risse, ‘Let’s Argue!’

38. Mlada Bukovansky, Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). The various sub-actors in a collective actor become constituted by the larger cultural structures. Thus unlike the natural approach to attraction this cultural approach could theoretically offer a coherent account of where attraction ‘sits’ in a collective body. But, as I argue, this conceptual improvement is neutralised by the fact that this Habermasian logic of attraction is circular.

39. Risse, ‘Let’s Argue!’
first place. The model, as such, is regressive: attraction is socially constructed through argument among legitimate interlocutors but the legitimacy of the interlocutors in turn depends upon attraction among them, which logically could only have been produced through argument among legitimate interlocutors, ad infinitum. Such reasoning offers no leverage over how, in the first instance, attraction was socially constructed. While it may not always matter for practical purposes what the origins of attraction are, where policy practitioners seek to deploy soft power over actors from different lifeworlds (and those are the actors that practitioners are usually the most eager to influence in world politics) this circular model is too thin on insight to be helpful. To really assess the promise of soft power as a ‘means to success in world politics’, a more complete and logical model of attraction is necessary – one that does not assume attraction as a precondition for its own production.

The Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction

So what would a better model of attraction look like? The model I offer rejects the possibility of natural attraction, beginning instead with the assumption that attraction is a socially produced ‘reality’. I argue specifically that ‘reality’ is produced through communicative exchange and that the type of communicative exchange through which a ‘reality’ of attractiveness is most likely to be produced in world politics is a competitive form called verbal fighting. Since verbal fighting is characterised by representational force, attractiveness tends to be suffused with coercion. Soft power is not so soft.

Communicative Exchange

‘Realities’ – whether of attractiveness, legitimacy, or anything else – are simply cultures. They are intersubjectively constructed matrices of beliefs through which a population signifies things, people, and ideas. In light of this, the question ‘how does attraction happen?’ can be reformulated as ‘how is culture constructed?’. There are numerous ways

40. For instance, one might argue that human rights activists around the globe have such a robust common lifeworld that the collective process of further refining and formulating the content of human rights can be accomplished without worrying about its dependence on prior attraction among the interlocutors. I am skeptical of even this example however since the common lifeworld that informs human rights activism (and so the attraction upon which it rests) is actually not all that ‘common’ globally.
Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

to conceptualise the process through which culture/’reality’ is constructed,41 but at some implicit or explicit level all of them depend on communicative exchange.42 Understood as the process through which actors convey their interpretations and perceptions of things in the world to each other, communicative exchange is mediated through language – that is, through collective, socially shared sign systems.43 What makes communicative exchange crucial is that it enables actors to transform their subjective, privately-held opinions about what they see in the world into public information. Only when a private thought is transformed through communication into public information does it stand the chance of becoming a social ‘fact’ and part of culture/’reality’.44

In this way culture/’reality’ is not just socially constructed; it is sociolinguistically constructed.

To pin the onus of social construction on communicative exchange however is not to say that all publicly uttered interpretations become social ‘facts’ in ‘reality’. On the contrary, for any given object of observation there are quite possibly an infinite number of often-contradictory interpretations of its character and significance, and not all of them acquire the status of ‘truth’. For instance, when asked the best type of political system actors utter both that ‘democracy is the best form of government’ and that ‘communism is more fair than democracy’. And yet, at least in the West, only the former has been anointed as ‘true’. From this point it follows that the primary burden of

41. For instance, Bourdieu argues that culture is a product of practice; Bukovansky argues that culture is a product of rules and discourse; and of course even though Habermas presupposes a culture (in the form of lifeworld), he poses argument as a way to envision the development of further culture. Pierre Bourdieu, _The Logic of Practice_, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992); Mlada Bukovansky, _Legitimacy and Power Politics_; and Jürgen Habermas, ‘Discourse Ethics’.

42. In the Habermasian model, the role of communicative exchange in the production of culture is rooted in argument; in Bukovansky’s model, communicative exchange is implied by the focus on discourse—a language-based matrix of meaning (_Legitimacy and Power Politics_, 22); in the Bourdieusian model, communicative exchange can be seen as the key process that makes habitus intelligible. See Iver B. Neumann, ‘Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy’, _Millennium: Journal of International Studies_ 31, no. 3 (2002); and Richard Biernacki, ‘Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural Inquiry’, _History and Theory_ 39, no. 3 (2000): 304.

43. Again any sign system amounts to language – whether those signs are verbal or written words, gestures, art, or other forms of expression.

44. Hayden White, _The Content of the Form_, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
a sociolinguistic model must be to demonstrate how certain interpretations (in this case, of attractiveness) acquire the social status of ‘truth’ in a given population while others do not.

In this vein I offer that the ultimate prevalence of one representation over another depends upon communicative strategy; that is, on how the speaker articulates his interpretation to listeners during communicative exchanges. This idea, which is informed by Lyotard, emphasises not merely what the speaker says, who the speaker is, or to whom she speaks, but even more fundamentally, how she speaks. It emphasises the particular manner in which a speaker links the phrases of her narrative together to form a coherent representation. This focus on micro-level linguistic structure differs from Habermasian and Foucaultian approaches (both of which have found expression in IR), for in those content trumps linguistic form as the key to ‘reality’ construction. An utterance’s success at becoming ‘fact’ depends upon the positive resonance of its content with relevant and shared, extant ‘realities’ among the interlocutors. However since such resonance is only possible where interlocutors share a common lifeworld, those models can only explain how a social ‘fact’ gets selected among actors that are already mutually attracted. Those models, thus, could not envision how an incipient ‘reality’ of attraction might emerge, for instance, between Islam and the West. In contrast, the model I offer does not appeal to a prior common lifeworld to explain how some utterances win out over others. Rather, it proposes that the ultimate determinant of whether something becomes ‘true’ is the communicative strategy that the speaker deploys.

Consider, then, communicative strategy. When a speaker (or author) wishes to convey an interpretation (content) she must craft words and sentences into a narrative (form). Importantly, there are different ways to do so (genres). For instance, one might structure her narrative as an argument, a negotiable proposition, a metaphor, a direct challenge, or so on. What differentiates genres is the strategy each entails for reaching the audience. So when an author forms her narrative as an argument, she uses a genre that relies upon a strategy of 

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45. In the case of Foucault, ‘truth’ is produce by ‘grafting’ it to relevant extant discourses. Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

46. Which advocates of soft power believe is very possible.

persuasion to reach its audience. Accordingly the words and sentences in arguments are linked together in such a way that the content is presented as a discovery of a Truth realized through the accumulation of evidence. In contrast, where an author crafts her narrative as a negotiable proposition, she adopts a genre that relies upon a strategy of bargaining. In that case, words and sentences are linked together in a way intended to play on the mutual distaste among the interlocutors for deadlock. Other genres have different strategic logics and give rise to different arrangements of words and sentences.

With so many communicative strategies, any ‘reality’ construction process begins with authors’ choices about which genre to use. While in some cases an author’s choice may be unconscious, unacknowledged, or predetermined by the communicative community (and thus, not much of a choice), in less institutionalised situations, such as world politics, authors think very carefully before they speak. They think not just about content but form as well. They base their choice of communicative strategy upon beliefs about which will be most effective for advancing their perspective to the status of ‘reality’, given the context and specific interlocutors involved. The question for an author thus is how to say what is on his mind in a way most likely to give it social standing.

As an important aside, this proposition that authors choose their communicative strategy would seem to inhere some meta-theoretical claims that contradict the constructivist starting point of this model. Inasmuch as ‘reality’ is a sociolinguistic construct, it follows that so must be the ‘reality’ of a being’s Self. How then, one might wonder, can we square such a radically constructed ontology with assertions of actors that have interests, and the agency and rationality to pursue them through concerted choices about communicative strategy? Upon reflection, however, it appears that there is nothing incommensurable about a sociolinguistically constituted Self and a capacity to strategise and act. A sociolinguistically constituted Self becomes ‘real’ as a function of the multiplicity of (often overlapping and intertwined) sociolinguistically produced ‘realities’ through which a being is situated in relation to others. In other words, the Self emerges through the culture/’realities’ in which it is embedded – so, for instance, my Self is constituted by the ‘realities’ that render me a scholar, mother,
wife, and so on; while the US’s Self is constituted by the ‘realities’ that render it a democracy, hegemon, global policeman, and so on. Importantly, it is precisely the embeddedness of the Self in those constitutive ‘realities’ that bestow beings with interests, agency, and rational capacity. Just as the sociolinguistic ‘reality’ that constitutes me as a mother gives me the interest, agency, and capacity to choose to stay home with my child as often as possible, so does the sociolinguistic ‘reality’ that constitutes the US as a global hegemon give it the interest, agency, and capacity to choose to try to order international politics in a way that perpetuates its dominance. There is, as Roland Bleiker puts it, an axis connecting the sociolinguistic production of culture/’reality’ and the production of agency.\(^{50}\)

An actor’s choice of communicative strategy can be linked to the sociolinguistic ontology of her agency. Because her Self is a sociolinguistic construct, an author’s interpretation of a given thing in the world – and so the representations she articulates during the course of a communicative exchange – are not just disinterested observations, but precious traces of her own subjectivity. If a sociolinguistic matrix of culture/’realities’ is what gives her the capacity to act (author) in the first place, it follows that the content of her interpretations are both derivative of and reproductive of that matrix. An actor’s representations of the world both issue from and reinforce her Self. Thus, I interpret the world through a sociolinguistic matrix of scholar-mother-wife-and-so-on; the US does so through that of hegemon-policeman-democracy-and-so-on. The implication is that participation in communicative exchange offers actors an opportunity to reproduce the very ‘realities’ that author them into existence in the first place. Given that linguistic form is the ultimate arbiter of a representation’s chance at becoming (or remaining) ‘reality’, the author’s choice of communicative strategy during communicative exchange will bear significantly on her ontological security.\(^{51}\)

\(^{50}\) Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency, and Global Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). In this formulation I am positing that in order to participate in the construction of a culture/’reality’ beings must already be actors: they must have some sociolinguistically constituted Self. However, they need not necessarily share any relevant aspects of their sociolinguistic constitution with their interlocutors. In this way I am not assuming the equivalent of a common lifeworld among interlocutors; merely that each participant has some Self-sources prior to entrance into the communicative exchange.

\(^{51}\) On ontological security, see Jef Huysmans, ‘Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no.
Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

It bears emphasis that participation in communicative exchange is not optional for actors; it is necessary. If a particular Self is to survive it is necessary to vigilantly protect the sociolinguistic matrix that produces it. In the absence of such protection that matrix would be erased piecemeal by alternative contending or contradictory ‘realities’. Participation thus has an urgent purpose; the stakes for an author of ensuring that her particular interpretation be anointed as ‘real fact’ may be as high as the integrity of her very subjectivity. From this it follows that an author will tend to choose communicative strategies that are most effective at establishing or sustaining her representation as ‘reality’.

In different contexts different communicative strategies will be more and less effective. For instance, persuasive arguing could be an effective strategy where interlocutors share a common lifeworld. Bargaining could be effective where interlocutors recognise each other as eager to reach a conclusion and willing to make compromises to do so. And others – manipulation, seduction, and so on – may work well in other circumstances. However there are a variety of situations in which any of these strategies is likely to disappoint; for instance, in ‘first encounters’ (in which actor subjectivities overlap they are not mutually aware of it); in situations in which all that the actors know about each other is that they are quite different (in which case their subjectivities entail incommensurable, competitive ‘realities’); or where actors are in the midst of a crisis with each other (during which their overlapping ‘realities’ are sociolinguistically ‘erased’). In any of these cases the interlocutors will be unable to perceive each other as legitimate or they will lack adequate information to effectively discern each other’s intentions. Yet such are precisely the necessary preconditions for bargaining, arguing, manipulation, seduction, and so on.

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52. This is even more pronounced for collective actors, whose sociolinguistic matrices are yet more intricate.

53. Of course actors don’t always choose the most rational strategy. There are also instances in which the most rational strategy is to not protect one’s Self. For a discussion, see Janice Bially Mattern, Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representational Force, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 117-124.


56. On seduction and its preconditions, see Jean Laplanche, Seduction, Translation and the Drives, (New York: Ica Editions, 1993); on manipulation, see Marcia Baron, ‘Manipulativeness,’ Proceedings and Addresses of the American
In fact, since a communicative strategy is selected on its capacity to help an author advance her representation to ‘reality’, then even under perfect circumstances persuasion, bargaining, manipulation, and seduction would be risky. None threaten to punish the audience if it fails to submit to the author’s viewpoint, so the audience has room to refuse. Precisely because Self-preservation is bound up with advancing a representation to the status of ‘reality’, the most efficacious communicative strategy will be one that leaves the audience no room to refuse; it will seek to boldly defeat alternatives without hesitation, engagement, discussion, or playful antics. With this in mind, the best communicative strategy is verbal fighting.

Representational force

Verbal fighting is a communicative form through which an author attempts to bully the audience into agreement with his interpretation. The strategy of this genre is representational force. A form of force like any other, representational force wields a blunt, nonnegotiable threat intended to radically limit the options of the subjects at whom it is directed. In contrast to argument, bargaining, manipulation, or other strategies that stop short of threatening the audience, representational force does just that. It aims to close off its victims’ options by promising them unthinkable harm unless they comply in word and in deed with the force-wielder’s demands. In this way, like physical force, representational force aspires to leave its victim’s no ‘out’.

Of course there are key differences between representational and physical force. By way of clarification, Thomas Schelling’s observations about coercive force are useful. Schelling argues that coercive force works by giving the victim the appearance of a choice about compliance. The choice however is actually a ‘nonchoice’ since it is offered to the victim in the context of a credible threat – indeed, a promise – of some physical loss so horrifying (often death) that the victim must succumb to the force-wielder’s wishes if she is to avoid it. Coercion thus works like a trap; either submit or risk death. Representational force works the same way: through credible threats of unbearable harm to its victims. However, the threats it poses are aimed at the victim’s subjectivity rather than physicality and are communicated not in reference to material capabilities but through the way the author structures her narrative. This raises two questions: How can an aspiring force-wielder credibly threaten her victim’s Self?

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Philosophical Association 77, no. 2 (2003).
57. Schelling, Arms and Influence, 3-4.
Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

and, How can she convey that threat through the organisation of the words and sentences she deploys to articulate her view of ‘reality’?

In regard to devising threats, the answer returns to the sociolinguistic ‘foundations’ of ‘reality’ – this time that of the victim’s Self. I have argued that a subject is only as secure as the sociolinguistic matrix that constructs her. This suggests that the force-wielder can devise a threat by promising to narrate away some precious fundamental ‘truth’ in the configuration of ‘realities’ or cultures that constitutes her victim. One especially effective way to do this is by highlighting contradictions and inconsistencies in the narratives that produce the victim’s subjectivity, especially in contexts that are intolerable for the victim. For instance, one might exploit the contradictions between professorhood and motherhood in the context of the tenure process. Exposing such inconsistencies can have serious material implications (e.g., diminishing prospects for tenure) but it can also, depending on how important each of the contradictory aspects of Self are to the subject in question, threaten the very logic of the victim’s subjectivity. It can set off a ‘domino effect’ of instability among the narratives that make up the victim’s Self, even leading to the collapse or ‘death’ of that particular subject.58 In fact, it is from this eventuality that the requirement of submission to representational force in word and deed follows. If the victim failed to live the ‘reality’ to which she submits she would be subject to further coercion by the same threatening logic in the future.59

So how does an author construct a threat credible enough to be this effective on its victim? Since threats derive from inconsistencies and contradictions in the victim’s Self, knowledge of the victim’s subjectivity is indispensable to representational force. An author must be able to locate the contradictions and inconsistencies in her victims and exploit them meaningfully. Importantly, since any Self is constituted socially through discourse, no common lifeworld is required to acquire such information about one’s victims. It is available through the public statements of Self that any actor necessarily makes. Nevertheless, and just like with physical force, there are various contingencies that may prevent the aspiring force-wielder from developing a credible threat. For instance, the contradiction between aspects of a victim’s Self may have no effect at all on the target’s subjectivity, particularly if the contradictory constitutive components are each instantiated by multiple, reinforcing narratives. In that case a

58. No author could narrate a ‘reality’ away completely on his own but he can deliver the ‘final straw’.

603
challenge to one such narrative can be tolerated without creating ontological insecurity. Alternatively the force-wielder may miscalculate and threaten some aspect of his victim’s subjectivity that is not at all central to the victim’s Self. In that case the victim may not care if it is destabilised or erased. Still, even though not all threats will be credible, all that is required for an author to at least attempt to devise a credible threat is that she pay attention to the sociolinguistic matrix through which her victim’s Self is constituted.

Once the author has found a credible way to threaten her victim she can construct her own preferred version of the ‘truth’ in such a way that entails that threat; she can deploy representational force. To do so, the author must narrate the particular representation that she wants to fix as ‘real’, but in addition she must arrange the words and sentences of that representation in a way that evokes the threat that she has devised. The content of her representation must be structured not as evidence to be argued, a demand to be considered, or so on, but as an ineluctable ultimatum. For instance, as I argue below, the manner in which the US represented its war on terror in the early post-9/11 days contained in its very structural logic a promise of unbearable subjective harm to particular states unless they abided the American viewpoint. To construct this narrative, American authors situated particular words and phrases in particular relation to each other so that the combination conjured up the harm. They also placed words and sentences in such a way that offered the clause of exemption – the coercive nonchoice in which the victims could avoid harm by committing in word and in deed to the US’s version of its post-9/11 policies. It is through just such an organisation of words and sentences that representationally forceful narratives leave their victims no room to refuse.

Where authors are concerned to preserve their Self, where they are able to learn enough about their victim’s Self to develop a threat, and especially where there is no relevant prior attraction among interlocutors, verbal fighting through a representationally forceful narrative structure will offer the most reliable (and so rational) strategy for an author to attempt to construct a ‘reality’. In world politics – which is, relatively speaking, poorly institutionalised and full of actors who are either unsure about their relationships to one another or in the midst of crises – verbal fighting is bound to be the most common process through which the ‘reality’ of attraction is socially constructed. Of course, in that case attraction rests on coercion, and so the soft power to which it gives rise is not so soft after all.

The ‘Reality’ of American Attractiveness

In support of the claim that soft power is not always so soft, consider how American attractiveness (and so American soft power) was
Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics

sociolinguistically constructed immediately following 9/11. At the center of that effort was the phrase ‘war on terrorism’. On one level, the Bush administration had adopted this phrase to signify the ‘hard power’ actions it planned to undertake in response to the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. Yet, as Nye suggests, ‘war on terrorism’ was also intended to construct a ‘reality’ of American attractiveness and so to help cultivate soft power.60 This intention becomes clear in the administration’s juxtaposition of the war on terror as a legal and morally righteous act of self-defense against the intractably lawless acts of the terrorists. The contrast obviously highlighted the attractive, good US against the abjectly evil Other. Perhaps more powerfully, though, the US intention to construct its own attractiveness is revealed by the very choice of the phrase ‘war on terrorism’, rather than, say, some phrase that conjured up a retaliation against the persons responsible for the 9/11 attacks. By choosing the former the US implicitly made a promise to defend the whole world from the whole phenomenon of terrorism. Rather than just redressing the threats that affected Americans, the US committed to ‘rooting out terrorism’ altogether. In this way the phrase ‘war on terrorism’ represented the US as a strong, globally responsible leader – a ‘fact’ which supported the ‘reality’ of American attractiveness.61

Of course the narrative rendering of ‘war on terrorism’ as a reflection of American attractiveness was not the only one, and not everyone was naturally inclined toward it. For instance, in the direct aftermath of 9/11 one powerful alternative interpretation of ‘war on terrorism’ emerged among ‘foreign publics’ who worried that it would justify ‘indefinite incarceration of foreign prisoners’.62 For these authors, ‘war on terrorism’ was not a ‘fact’ in evidence of American attractiveness, but a caution about the ways in which the US might expand its international control. From the perspective of the US, such an interpretation was ‘dissident’; if anointed ‘reality’ in the international community, this perspective would diminish American soft power. So the US took (linguistic) action. Along with other actors who were already attracted to its policies, the US sought to defeat the dissent through verbal fighting.63 Using representational force to narrate its version of the meaning of ‘war on terrorism’ these authors cleared

60. Nye, Soft Power, 122.
63. Collective actors (in this case the US, but also other actors in world politics who were already attracted to its policies) speak via key persons who, in a given context, are positioned so that they symbolise and embody the whole and can act
the field of viable alternative interpretations in a way that promoted theirs to the status of ‘truth’. For at least the first six months following 9/11, representational force was effective; the American view prevailed as ‘reality’. 64

It worked like this: the US first devised words and sentences depicting the war on terror as righteous, appropriate, and the only logical response to 9/11, and then they linked those to the threat that ‘you are either with us or with the terrorists’. 65 In other words, US authors structured their narrative in a way that linked a representation of attraction to and approval of their policies with a representation that drew a line between good and evil. The effect of this linguistic structure was to similarly draw a line designating those against the policy and the US as definitively evil. For members in the audience whose subjectivities depended in important part on narrative ‘realities’ about being on the ‘good’ side of the good/evil divide, this created a trap. The ‘nonchoice’ was either to accept the US-articulated ‘reality’ of its own attractiveness and preserve the ‘reality’ of their own moral righteousness; or deny it and contradict the logic and integrity of the narratives that inscribed their ‘goodness’. By forging a link between the phrase ‘war on terrorism’ and that of ‘with us or with the terrorists’ the US used the structure of their narrative to coerce.

It is important to note that the coercive threat entailed by the logic of ‘with or against us’ was not a physical threat. In fact, no US administration official ever articulated any relationship between a refusal to accept the attractiveness of the American war on terror and military repercussions. There was a physical threat associated with harboring terrorists, but that was not the threat implied by the narrative links between ‘war on terror’ and ‘with or against us’. The latter threat was meant for actors that dissented from the appeal of the envisioned American war on terrorism but who did not harbor terrorists (or acknowledge it). It was meant for those who just disagreed. For those authors the non-choice ‘offered’ by the American utterance was to either...
reject American attractiveness, which would cast them on the side of the ‘evil’ terrorists in a way that contradicted their own goodness thus making them agents of their own sociolinguistic destabilization, or accept US attractiveness, support its post-9/11 policies, and sustain the stability of their Self.

Importantly, had the American authors structured their narrative of the war on terrorism differently the options facing the audience would have been rather different as well. They certainly would have been less restrictive. For instance, the American authors might have narrated the war on terrorism as a proposition about the best way to exact justice and security in the aftermath of 9/11. They might, that is, have structured their narrative as an argument based on evidence arrived at through reasoning. In that case the audience would have had the option to contest through evidence and reasoning, without fear of punishment. Alternatively, the US authors might have structured their narrative about the war on terrorism as a bargain, inviting the audience to engage in demand-exchange. By instead structuring the narrative in a way that threatened dissidents with categorisation as evil, the authors made submission unavoidable for those audience members who were unwilling to risk degradation of their status as good. Dissident narratives thus disappeared and support for the war on terror, as almost unlimited as it was during that first half-year after 9/11, became a resource for American soft power.66

The forceful ‘war on terrorism’ narrative did, of course, face limitations for shoring up American attractiveness and soft power. For instance, the threat of ‘with us or against us’ only compelled, trapped, and effectively coerced those would-be dissidents whose subjectivities depended in part on sustaining a ‘reality’ of themselves as good according to the US definition of ‘good’. In this regard it should have been predictable that Iraq, whose subjectivity under Saddam Hussein’s reign was decidedly not bound up with the same kind of goodness as that implied by the American narrative, could not be coerced into endorsing the attractiveness of American policy by this specific representationally forceful narrative. The same was true of the western European democracies (notably France and Germany), though for a rather different reason. In this case, their subjectivity as morally righteous,

66. I have illustrated representational force by reference to an example in which a materially powerful country coerced less powerful ones into accepting its ‘truth’. However it is just as easily the case that a materially weaker or less powerful state might rely on representational force to cultivate its attractiveness and soft power over stronger states. For instance, as scholars of UK-US relations have often noted, that friendship is not about the British pandering to American
distinctly non-evil states was reinforced in so many ways by so many other overlapping ‘realities’ in the sociolinguistic matrix that made up their Selves that the risk of incurring whatever contradictions might be wrought for their subjectivity as a result of resisting the US view on the war on terrorism would be minimal. Of course, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the western European democracies did support the US policies, but it is less compelling to think of that support as a function of attraction cultivated through representational force than as a pre-existing attraction; a convergence of European and US beliefs based on a pre-existing common lifeworld. Later, when the US began planning its invasion of Iraq, the common transatlantic lifeworld about what it meant to be a morally righteous state in world politics fractured. Logically one might thus contend that the ensuing European dissent was made possible precisely because of the imperviousness of European Selves to the ‘with us or with the terrorists’ threat that the US had constructed.

Where representational force was effective was on those subjects whose sense of Self as morally righteous was important (unlike Iraq) but also indebted to singular or weaker sociolinguistic ‘realities’ (unlike many European countries). These include, for instance, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey. These states were susceptible to the American coercive narrative (and were probably the target audience for the narrative in the first place) because their status as ‘good’ was tenuous. The risk of association with the putatively evil terrorists would be a risk too high to bear. Consider Jordan: in exchange for fortification of the ‘reality’ of its moral righteousness, Jordan accepted the logic of the war on terrorism. It embraced the ‘reality’ of American policy as attractive. King Abdullah II of Jordan displayed the ‘nonchoice’ logic driving his submission to the American narrative quite clearly when he stated that ‘it is very obvious that there are those on the side of good and those on the side of bad and some in the middle, who haven’t made up their minds, and those countries better make up their minds pretty quickly’.

power, or even some natural mutual confluence of attractions, but rather is, in significant part, the product of cunning, sharp British narratives of ‘truth’ that have significantly shaped American perspective and policy. In this way representational force is not a function of one’s relative material prowess; it is a function of knowing how to trap the subjectivity of one’s target audience. On the Anglo-American affinity, see Christopher Hitchens, Blood, Class, and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1990).

67. This was before the old/new Europe debacle.

Beyond merely articulating agreement with the American representation, the King also abided the imperative to live the ‘reality’ of attraction to the US. Even as the Jordanian people protested, their government stood by its ‘attraction’ by hosting US military exercises near the border with Iraq. That the Jordanian government enacted its attraction to the US against the opposition of domestic Jordanian groups highlights that by no means did all Jordanians feel attracted to the US policy. But that is not required by representational force; what is required is that the government’s policies forced the collectivity of Jordan to live through the effects of an attraction to the US, even though attraction did not accurately describe the psychic state of all of the sub-actors in Jordan. In fact, so effective was representational force in this case – so urgent was the Jordanian government’s desire to stave off the threats to its subjectivity by enacting its attraction to US policies – that it even took up arms against its own dissenting people. This amounted to a radical departure from one of Jordan’s other cultures/‘realities’: its Self as peaceful. In this way Jordan sacrificed one aspect of Self to save another that it deemed more crucial to the overall stability and security of its subjectivity. Attraction to the US had become a matter of subjective life and death. The US had effectively used representational force to construct a ‘reality’ of its own attractiveness.

Not-So-Soft Power in World Politics

What does it mean that verbal fighting and representational force can be the basis for attraction? For one, it highlights a need to reconsider what exactly is ‘soft’ about soft power. In Nye’s formulation the distinction between hard and soft expressions of power turns on whether power is enacted through attraction or coercion. But since representational force is a form of coercion, attraction may rest upon coercion. Where it does, the distinction Nye had in mind between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ evaporates.


70. It does nothing to the logic of soft power if the attraction is just as if rather than Real since in the end there is no difference in terms of the effects. Soft power is about getting others to do what you want them to do without having to rely on hard power. It is not cultivating the psychic experience of attraction. Moreover there is no way to know about the kind of psychic experience the actor is really having and so whether they ever really experience attraction. Language and action are all there are.

While ‘soft’ power may still be soft in some other way, some reassessment of the conventional analyses and expectations associated with ‘soft’ power is in order.

Consider the way that soft power has been integrated into IR theory. It is could be argued that the greatest contribution of soft power in this literature has been to provide a conceptual bridge between ‘ideas’ and ‘material’ approaches to state behaviour. Soft power, after all, is a function of ideas, yet it operates in a way that recognises power as the currency of international life. The revelation that soft power is not so soft does not actually alter this insight – soft power rooted in attraction built on representational force is still a form of power that has its source in ideas rather than material bases. But it does great damage to a key derivative insight: that an anarchy organised through the soft power of constructive engagement avoids the relentlessly competitive world associated with materialist approaches. At issue is that if soft power is the function of an attraction constructed through a coercive process of communicative exchange it can hardly be said that soft power avoids relentless competition among actors. On the contrary, it depends precisely upon a competition among actors over the terms of the ‘reality’ of attractiveness. Thus, in an international relationship where soft power reigns, the anarchy among the actors would remain at base competitive. The difference is simply that the competition occurs at the level of subjectivity and ‘reality’ production rather than at the level of material resources.

From the preceding analytic points arise some practical suggestions that differ markedly from current suggestions about how to pursue soft power. Practitioners interested in reaping the gains of soft power have focused on ‘cultivating’ attraction by educating others about one’s attractive qualities. As Nye argues, the best way to accomplish this is through public diplomacy – that is, through talking to broad swathes of global populations about who ‘we’ are, by offering information about ‘our’ values and culture, and, importantly, by listening to who ‘they’ are. But when one adopts a view of soft power as rooted in representational force all aspects of this plan for cultivating attraction change. One does not talk to others but verbally fights with them using representational force to leave them as little room as possible to refuse. Moreover, one need not address broad swathes of populations. Rather the key is to specifically trap leaders or decision makers with threats to their subjectivities since it is they whose submission translates into policy and

73. Nye, Soft Power, 111.
behaviours. They are the ones that force the entire collective to live the experience of attraction. On this view, then, cultivating attraction and producing soft power are much more intimate and intense experiences among specific people than on the conventional view. Last, whereas in the conventional view, listening is crucial to the cultivation of attraction and soft power, on the view offered here, listening is dangerous. Listening offers one’s adversary/interlocutor a window of opportunity in which to use representational force to coerce you into submission.74

In addition to these reconsiderations of strategies for cultivating attraction are reconsiderations of strategies for deploying soft power. For instance, Nye, among others, has been rather vocal about the importance of stockpiling soft power.75 Implicit in this logic is that soft power ought to be treated as if it were military power – as something that should be kept in reserve and ready to go in situations where it is appropriate. But where attractiveness and thus soft power are a matter of representational force, stockpiling appears impossible, or at least counterproductive. After all, where soft power is more accurately based on representational force it exists only for as long as the coerced victims continue to feel the threat to their subjectivity. As soon as a victim ceases to feel trapped by the threat in the representational force that led him to submit in the first place, he will most likely no longer feel like he must comply.76 This eventuality arises from the fact that victims’ subjectivities, like all sociolinguistic ‘realities,’ change over time. Given the changeability of Selves, a more efficacious approach would be to cultivate attraction and use the ‘soft’ power it yields on an as-needed basis.

Finally, thinking about soft power through a sociolinguistic lens has some striking normative implications. Understood through the conventional lens, soft power has appeared as an alternative to the raw power politics that so frequently characterise world politics. It has thus been embraced by ethically-minded scholars and policymakers. But the realisation that soft power is not so soft encourages some critical rethinking about its ethical value. Where soft power is indebted to representational force it promulgates a form of power politics that operates on the level of subjectivity. It promotes a ‘power politics of identity’ in which domination is played out through the representations that narrate ‘reality’. In my opinion a power politics of identity,

74. Though listening in other low-stakes contexts is crucial so that one can learn where one’s victim’s Self is vulnerable.
76. It could last also if the victim comes to internalise their compliance as part of the ‘realities’ that constitute their subjectivity, though that process would require a some further theorisation.
however unappealing, is normatively more appealing than the power politics of war, empire, and physical conquest. But even so, one must still question the moral logic of representational force. Given that soft power may, in the end, not be all that soft, it is worth considering the ethical dimensions and dilemmas that arise when using it as ‘a means to success in world politics’.

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